

Dramatising a Poem

By Ovaiza Sally

Activities that help make the study of English interesting ought to be encouraged and, as such, poems that lend themselves to dramatisation should be used more widely in our schools than at present. These poems can be used regularly in class and, like reading, spelling, or composition, can be an integral part of the teaching scheme for the year. Some poems that can be dramatised are “The Highwayman” by Alfred Neyes, “The Pigtail” by W. M. Thackeray, “Lord Randal” and “The House That Jack Built.” Teachers themselves can think of many other poems to suit the needs of their class.

One of the advantages of dramatising a poem is that the entire class can take part in the activity. Apart from the individual lines, there can be a chorus for the “story part” of the poem, which can include the whole class. Each pupil plays a part, according to his/her ability.

For classroom acting, elaborate sets are not required. Any material at hand can be used with the classroom itself as the stage. Thus, it is an activity that is easy to handle.

Organisation

Step One: Explanation of the poem. The poem (if short) is written on the blackboard to be copied by the pupils, but a long poem like “The Diverting History of John Gilpin” by William Cowper should be duplicated for the students. An explanation of the poem should be brief. The meaning grows as the poem is acted out, thus making a detailed explanation a waste of time.

Step Two: Dramatisation of the poem. The “cast” is selected and the play is rehearsed. At least four trial lessons are necessary before a short poem can be dramatised without help from the teacher. A long poem will take longer because the whole poem cannot be rehearsed in one lesson period and has to be done section by section. It also means that when a long poem is finally dramatised in its entirety, two lesson periods might be necessary, or else the “play” would have to be acted out after school.

Sometimes it is possible to select an extract for dramatisation from a long poem. This can be done, for example, in the case of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” by Robert Browning. The pupils read the whole poem, but dramatise it only up to the point where the rats are going to be drowned, ending with the lines:

Until they came to the River Weser, Wherein all plunged and perished’.

Even so, the pupils practiced almost to the end of the term. The final presentation took three consecutive lesson periods.

Costumes are not essential for classroom acting, but the play is enjoyed all the more when the actors are dressed up. Therefore, costumes, if they are available, should be worn.

Right from the start, the pupils must be encouraged to memorise their lines. The success of a play depends on expressive acting, which is hampered if the actors have to keep looking at their lines. When a part is long, the teacher can break it up into suitable units of 4–8 lines. For the first day, the pupil memorises the first four lines, the second, the next four, and so on.

In the case of a lengthy chorus as in “Lochinvar,” there can be two or three sets of pupils taking part, each set memorising a section of the chorus. They stand in rows on one side of the classroom and move back as they finish their part.

Although a large audience cannot be accommodated in a classroom, at least one other person (such as the principal or another teacher) should be present on the day of the final performance. The actors then perform as well as they can, which helps give them a feeling of achievement.

Below are instructions for acting out “The Owl and The Pussy Cat” by Edward Lear. One would naturally expect a poem of this nature to appeal to children of eight and nine, but it was acted and enjoyed by a class of 14- and 15-year-olds. As W. R. Lee has pointed out, “Probably nearly all of us are contented to be more childish in a foreign language than in our own, or, rather, we do not in a foreign language find the sort of games and songs, pictures and activities, unduly childish which seem in our mother tongue to be so.” (*English Language Teaching*, XXVI, I, 1971. p. 1.) What is important is that activities of this kind enliven our lessons, and make the study of English enjoyable. Psychologically they are an aid to learning.

The “The Owl and the Pussy Cat” naturally breaks into the following roles: Owl, Pussy Cat, Piggy-wig, Turkey, Bong- trees, Moon, and Chorus. When the play opens, the chorus is on one side of the room. In front of the chorus is a boat (bench preferably covered with a green cloth) and the oars (poles). On the other side are the bong-trees (pupils dressed in green and carrying branches of leaves). In front of them is a table and two chairs. The table is laden with “mince” (assorted sweets) and “quince” (slices of fruit). There is also a large spoon on the table. The play follows on the next page.

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